

**REMARKS BY  
GENERAL JAMES T. CONWAY,  
COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS  
MARINE SECURITY GUARD GRADUATION CLASS 2-08  
FRIDAY, 29 FEBRUARY 2008**

Well, good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning, Marines.

Let me start off by saying congratulations and to tell you how proud I am of the job that you're doing. I'm happy to be able to be down here to do it. It's good to be able to address you folks for the job that you've done, not only here in getting through this difficult course but in your time thus far as Marines that merited you the opportunity to be Marine Security Guards. That's a tough cut. I remember well my days as a battalion commander and as a company commander the type of Marines that we looked for to send to this school. So I'm impressed, and you should be very proud because you're off on some very good footing.

Ladies and gentlemen, you should also be proud of these young men and women because for I think the most part, with maybe three or four exceptions, they are Marine non-commissioned officers. That's a big deal. Marine NCOs increasingly run our Marine Corps. Marine NCOs are expected to be able to provide us with 24-hour leadership that we require. Our Marine NCOs are increasingly in combat, and I think 75 percent of these Marines you see before you today are veterans of either Iraq or Afghanistan. Increasingly in combat, they are expected to make life-and-death decisions on a mere fraction-of-second notice.

On days where it's 120 degrees and the rounds are just snapping around and a fire team member may be bleeding, they're expected to do the right thing, and invariably they do. It's just an incredible job that we see being performed today by these young NCOs — the trust and confidence that we put in them in combat, we are now going to put in them to go really all over the world to protect embassies and protect classified material and to represent our great Nation.

You know, we didn't always have the level of confidence that we have today in this young generation. I will be honest with you, a few years back, some old silver-haired guys and I sat down, and we expressed some concern that this generation had what it took to be good Marines and soldiers and sailors and airmen. We called them the "joystick generation." We thought maybe they did not have enough outdoor activity, not enough organized sports, maybe not enough discipline. Ladies and gentlemen, we were dead wrong. I have seen these people in combat. Their raw courage, their sense of self-sacrifice, their sense of team play is eye-watering. I assure you that our Corps is going to be in great shape for a long time to come as these young men and women continue to reach positions of greater responsibility and take their place as citizens in our great land.

I think there's probably three things that I would offer to you this morning as you get ready to go forward.

*The first is that you've got to know your orders cold, and then you've got to do the right thing.* Years ago, I was the Executive Officer of the Marine Detachment aboard the USS Kitty Hawk, another kind of special duty; we had 66 great new Marines that worked with us aboard ship. On this one particular at-sea period, we were undergoing an inspection, and there were a group of Navy lieutenant commanders and commanders out with us. One of the things that they tested our Marine Detachment to be able to do was to provide the ship's "minefield defense team." The minefield defense team on USS Kitty Hawk was two Marine expert marksmen and two spotters. The question was, how rapidly could they get to the bow and how rapidly could they engage possible floating mines?

Well, they responded magnificently and got there in record time, weapons and spotters in place. On this particular day, the Navy lieutenant commander said, "Okay, Corporal," Corporal Comacho was in charge of detail, "I want you to fire one round into the water, simulating engaging a mine, and this exercise is complete. You guys did really good." Corporal Comacho looked the commander in the eye and said, "Sir, I can't do that. I am not allowed to fire a weapon aboard ship unless I am *in extremis* or I am ordered to do so by the Commanding Officer or the Executive Officer of the Marine Detachment." The commander said, "Well, son, I just want you to fire one round. You guys are really doing great." He said, "Sir, I can't do that."

The captain of the ship, Captain Townsend, was up on the bridge, and he saw what was taking place. He sent a runner down. The runner got the scoop. He came back onto the bridge. Unfortunately, he said, "Sir, the Marine says he can't fire unless he's told to do so by the CO or the XO." Well, Captain Townsend took the ship's announcement system, the 1MC, into his hands. He said, "Okay, Marine, up on the bow, go ahead and put one round into the water."

Corporal Comacho did an about-face, came to attention (*CMC shakes his head; laughter*). Well, the captain was enraged. Immediately, the CO of the detachment, the XO of the detachment, Corporal Comacho, and the commander were ordered to the bridge. The captain reviewed the orders that said exactly what Corporal Comacho had said to the commander. He made a pen change on the spot that included the CO and the XO of the ship, and dismissed us all with pretty much a red face.

When we got down and started to part company, Corporal Comacho said to the CO of the Detachment, "Sir, I'm sorry if I embarrassed the Detachment." The captain said, "Corporal, you did exactly what I would have you do in that situation." A few hours later, as we walked through the mess decks, there was a light round of applause as the skipper and I went in to have a meal. After we sat down, the XO of the ship looked at us both and said, "Where do you get guys like that?" The captain's response was, "We get them the same place you do. We just train them differently." And we do. Gentlemen, ladies, understand your orders, cold, and then just do the right thing.

*The second thing I want to offer to you is that you will now represent, worldwide, the United States Marine Corps and the United States of America.* One of my predecessors, General Mundy, used to read to us a letter that he had received from an American businessman going through an embassy. I don't remember where. The letter talked about the fact that the businessman entered the embassy and was met at Post One

by a Marine sergeant. And as he buzzed and waited for his escort, they began a brief conversation.

Another Marine came in from the side and the Marine at Post One said, "Excuse me, sir." With that, both Marines went out and they lowered the colors. As they went through their duties, the businessman talked about what a poignant moment it was for him to see those Marines going about their duties and how carefully they lowered and then folded the flag, and how one opened the door for the other as he walked back in, one hand below and one hand on top of that flag. After the Marine at Post One very carefully put it away, the businessman said, "He could probably see the tear in my eye." The Marine simply said, "Your escort is here, sir. Have a good evening."

Everything you do will be observed by people in the embassy, by your fellow Americans who visit, by the foreigners that you will come in contact with. We expect you to do your absolute utmost to represent our Corps and our Nation to the very best of your ability. You do that and there will be no issues.

*The third thing I want to offer to you today, folks, is that we continue to be a Nation at war, engaged with terrorists.* We have been now for a long, long time. There's nothing that a terrorist organization would rather do than injure or kill a United States Marine. You are a priority target. I encourage you, as you go about to the various nations where you will be assigned, keep your battlefield skills intact. Do not become complacent. Do not become predictable. Do not give them that opportunity. Be hard to kill. When you return to your units, if we're still at this war, you will have your opportunity to turn that around.

Some of you folks will stay with us after you duty as a MSG; this is simply the next step, the B-billet, if you will. Some of you people will stay on and be the senior leadership that you see on either side of you here this morning. Many others of you will go onto civilian life, and that's a good thing, too. We make Marines, win battles, and create quality citizens.

But, either way, I want you to keep it in mind something that one of our former presidents, John F. Kennedy, had to say. And it was this: "In the long history of the world, only a few generations have the opportunity to defend freedom at its maximum hour of danger." You are one of those generations. Whether you go or whether you stay, for the rest of your lives, when you walk into a restaurant or a movie theater or a pub, you do so with your head held high and your chest out because you have chosen to serve at a time when your country is in crisis. And you've chosen to do it in the uniform of a United States Marine.

Congratulations. God bless you all.

*(End of transcript)*